



Libraries, Power, and Justice: Toward a Sociohistorically Informed Intellectual Freedom

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Libraries, Power, and Justice

Toward a Sociohistorically Informed Intellectual Freedom

By Alessandra Seiter

This paper critically examines the concept of intellectual freedom (IF) and the central role it plays in the U.S. library and information science (LIS) profession, challenging the concept's assumed basis in neutrality and demonstrating the active barrier it presents in its current implementation to existing and future social justice efforts. The paper argues that if LIS is to move from making ineffective calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) to actively working for justice within and beyond the field, then it must adopt an understanding of IF that fundamentally considers the sociohistorical context of power in LIS, the United States, and the world.

IF and Neutrality in the ALA's Codes of Ethics

Though the American Library Association (ALA) has codified EDI in its main ethical frameworks – the 1996 Library Bill of Rights (LBR) and the 2008 Code of Ethics (COE) – it is reluctant to explicitly outline which groups of people are intended to benefit from these initiatives, much less the societal power structures underlying the need for them. This reluctance means that, rather than facilitating LIS work toward social justice for oppressed peoples, the ALA's EDI efforts are absorbed into a framework of “neutral” IF which demands that LIS workers not enact policies or otherwise take actions that fall outside the status quo on an organizational or national level. In contrast to

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EDI, IF plays a crucial role in the ALA's main ethical frameworks, which represent the ideological hold IF has on the profession.

Both the LBR and COE define the basic principles that the ALA has determined should govern the operations of all U.S. libraries and the conduct of all U.S. LIS workers. Five out of the six articles in the LBR relate to IF (Knox, "IF" 11) while the entirety of the COE is devoted to "translat[ing] the *values of intellectual freedom that define the profession of librarianship* into broad principles" (COPE, emphasis added). The emphasis the ALA places on IF within the organization's two primary sets of ethical guidelines suggests that it has been chosen as *the* guiding principle of U.S. LIS above all others, even if it does not always translate into professional practice (Knox, "Supporting IF" 17-18).

Though the ALA's Office of IF only explicitly addresses censorship, access, filtering, shared physical spaces, and the rights of children, IF's priority role in the ALA's principles means that it has come to encompass many more issues than those listed—including EDI. The LBR's articles allude to this issue in their assertions that library resources should be provided for "all people of the community the library serves," and that library facilities should be made "available on an equitable basis." Similarly, the COE mandates that libraries enact "equitable service policies" and ensure "equitable access." This equity-as-access-for-all language is reflected in the mission of the ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services (ODLOS), which states the office's aim to support LIS workers "in creating responsible and all-inclusive spaces that serve and represent the entire community." While undoubtedly well-intentioned, the ALA's framework through which to work toward EDI assumes that, as long as everyone in a library's community has the IF to access the information they seek and express themselves based on it, the library will adequately serve the diverse needs of its patrons. However, this assumption fundamentally misunderstands the differences between equality, equity, and justice.

The ALA's IF-based praxis toward EDI ironically rests on principles of *equality* rather than equity (not to mention justice), presuming that everyone will benefit from the same supports regardless of their societal positionings of race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability. In contrast, an equity-based model understands that different peoples require varying kinds or levels of support due to the barriers they face to equal access or opportunity. However, neither equality nor equity models go so far as to call for the removal of the underlying source of the barriers. A framework which does make such a call is a justice-based one, which seeks to address the systemic roots of societal inequities and thus eliminate the need to provide any specialized supports ("Equality versus Equity").

Following a vibrant tradition of social justice-focused LIS scholarship

and praxis, this paper proposes a justice-based understanding of IF which facilitates the information-seeking and expressive behavior of those who have historically faced systemic oppression under the material and ideological hegemony in which LIS developed, with the ultimate goal of dismantling the sources of such oppression. This understanding is decidedly non-neutral, instead taking the position that because similarly non-neutral dominant ideologies formed and continue to shape not only LIS but the broader historical record (Morales, Knowles, & Bourg 445-446), LIS should take a longer view of history and power in order to determine what policies and practices would turn the library into a space truly representative of the diversity of knowledge that exists in their communities and beyond. To do so requires an understanding of the historical trajectory that gave birth to IF in LIS.

Historical Development of IF in U.S. LIS

The current dominant conception of IF in LIS and beyond is one which claims neutrality in giving equal weight to all information and viewpoints regardless of the power structures behind them. This view neglects to acknowledge the inherently political reasons why LIS adopted neutrality and IF as the conjoined guiding principles of the profession, and the specific (groups of) people these principles were meant to serve at different points in the profession's development.

The original goal of U.S. librarianship was to promote "good" books in order to cultivate an "enlightened" citizenry with "moral" character and behavior, based on an established social order dominated by white supremacy, misogyny, and capitalism (Knox, "Supporting IF" 15; Wiegand 101). Though the principle of IF was not present in early librarianship, this era of "good" book promotion is vital in demonstrating the oppressions that institutional neutrality can and has engendered.

Colonizers founded the profession of U.S. librarianship in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, setting up over seventy literary centers to encourage indoctrination into Anglican values among settler colonialists and the indigenous people whose lands they violently stole (Wiegand 100). By the middle of the nineteenth century, a wave of industrialization and immigration washed over the U.S., prompting much hand-wringing among Anglo-Saxon Protestants at the head of the country's social order that their status quo was under attack by foreign brown savages (102). Universal literacy was offered as a solution and implemented by these same power holders in the growing community of early U.S. libraries, whose collections "reflected the cultural, literary, and intellectual canons [that the white, wealthy settlers] had found useful in constructing their own interpretations of reality," yet were framed as containing universally "good" works (102).

Alongside the Enlightenment-based conceptions of “goodness” that dominated early U.S. librarianship, those in charge of libraries promoted the violent assimilation of indigenous people and immigrants into U.S. culture through processes of “Americanization” (“A History”), the social management of women through paying them far less than men and preventing them from advancing in one of the only fields that allowed for their employment (Wiegand 103), and the segregation of libraries, emboldened by *Plessy v. Ferguson*’s 1896 “separate but equal” ruling and upheld throughout and after the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s (“A History”). In other words, under the guise of morality-based neutrality, U.S. libraries in this era were champions of dominant power structures responsible for the oppression of people of color, women, and anyone else deemed immoral. LIS workers today should thus be wary of assertions of neutrality in the field, not only questioning who benefits and suffers from the structures upholding such neutrality but actively working to center the information needs of those impacted by past and current masks of neutrality.

IF did not come to guide contemporary LIS until the World War II era, when those in LIS saw it as their professional duty to take a clear political stance against Hitler’s dictatorship and in support of democratic values (Robbins 28-29). One year after social scientist Bernard Berelson called upon librarians in 1938 to “stand firmly against social and political and economic censorship of book collections” in light of fascism’s worldwide attack on democracy, the ALA Council adopted the first manifestation of the LBR and so codified IF into the principles of LIS (qtd. in Robbins 29). It is critical to emphasize here that IF arose in LIS as a form of direct opposition to fascism, signaling the inherently political original purpose of the now neutralized principle and setting a precedent for a re-politicized praxis of IF towards social justice today.

Unfortunately, the anti-fascist stance originally at the heart of IF soon gave way to a neutrality-based conception of the principle, adopted with the express purpose of shielding LIS workers from criticism. Nine years after the initial adoption of the LBR, the ALA passed a revised version of the code in response to McCarthyist anti-Communist witch hunts undertaken by the Truman Administration through such venues as the House Un-American Activities Committee (Robbins 30). However, instead of acting on their reaffirmed principles by defending access to material deemed “communist propaganda,” LIS workers mobilized IF through the provision of “all points of view” as a defense mechanism against accusations of being a communist (Gluck). “All points of view,” though, often did not include those targeted by McCarthyism, as demonstrated through the Library of Congress’

firing of queer people and anyone with “communist sensibilities” (Gluck). In this era, LIS was much more concerned with protecting its professional legitimacy than it was with standing in solidarity with those targeted by U.S. power structures.

This neutrality-based intellectual-freedom-as-professional-defense ideology pervades LIS today, resting on a hegemonic assumption in the social sciences that in order to do legitimate work in a field, practitioners must emphasize “empirical measurement, quantifiable data, and scientific ‘objectivity’” (Robbins 31). As Jensen notes, social science practitioners can typically be considered truly neutral – and thus legitimate – only if they “accept and replicate the dominant ideology” (30); otherwise, they are often deemed “biased” or accused of having a political agenda. Library historian Michael Harris has asserted that LIS workers have been particularly vulnerable to uncritically supporting oppressive power structures through IF due to their continual struggle to assert themselves as professionals (qtd. in Robbins 29-30). However, if LIS praxis is to remain relevant in a rapidly changing information landscape, it must cease to simply follow in the process of social change (Wiegand 99) and instead be an active participant by directly addressing social issues (Sparanese 45).

Both the LIS profession as a whole and its primary codified principle of IF grew to prominence out of particular sociohistorical contexts and clear political stances. The field’s development suggests that it is able to effectively lead struggles of justice-based social change when openly acknowledging the political aims of its IF, but only able to uphold dominant power structures when shrouding such aims under the guise of neutrality. The next section will more concretely explore what a praxis of IF actively informed by sociohistorical power structures and striving for social justice could look like.

Towards a Sociohistorically Informed IF

LIS must move from a praxis of IF which neutralizes efforts of EDI to one which actively, explicitly, and unapologetically works toward justice in solidarity with coworkers, patrons, and community members against the oppressive societal power structures that have shaped the LIS profession throughout its history. As Iverson notes, systemic inequities not only limit access to information resources in varying degrees for all those except society’s most powerful, but dictate who is able to *create* the majority of the pool of resources that ultimately end up in libraries (16). Our LIS praxis should seek to address what Frické, Mathiesen, and Fallis call this society-wide “macro-censorship” (475) through a sociohistorical model of IF that emphasizes access and knowledge creation among those disproportionately excluded from them.

This shift in IF allows for a number of things. First, it makes

possible increased representation of people of color, LGBTQ people, people in poverty, and people with disabilities in the LIS workforce—which, as of 2012 is 88 percent white and 96 percent able-bodied (ALA ORS, ALA ODLIS, & Decision Demographics). This potential is in line with the way the ALA conceptualizes diversity (“Key Action Areas”). Yet a justice-based, sociohistorically informed IF doesn’t seek to simply achieve this representation, but to break down the societal barriers preventing it. Second, the shift paves the way for LIS institutions to more actively engage with the communities in which they’re embedded, and to work in their interests instead of against them—especially, as Gibson et al note, when those communities are in crisis (751). This function of libraries as important community centers has been well established by LIS workers (Jaeger et al) and patrons (Horrigan) alike. Third, and arguably most importantly, the shift encourages a rejection of paternalistic and implicitly capitalistic models of “service” in favor of one of solidarity, through which LIS workers recognize their interests as intimately bound up with those of their patrons and work to break down (or at least complicate) the LIS worker-patron divide. In doing so, LIS workers can realize that we too face exploitation at the hands of the systems responsible for the oppression experienced by patrons, forming a strong basis of solidarity.

A sociohistorically informed IF does not, however, call for LIS spaces to exclude dominant forms of knowledge, resources which represent or endorse systemic forms of oppression, or staff members or patrons who are not part of the communities historically marginalized by the LIS profession and society at large. Instead, it shifts the focus of LIS spaces away from these entities, contextualizing the first two in ways that acknowledge their non-neutrality as upholders of a dominant (if not oppressive) status quo. This shift-not-exclusion framework rests on a contemporary socialist understanding of free speech, which recognizes that institutional protocols of restricting or banning speech have been and continued to be used in service of oppressive power structures. It also recognizes that hateful speech will not go away simply if it is banned, for such speech is a symptom of the power structures which uphold the systemic oppressions in our society (Dols). Further, if LIS spaces are to paint an accurate picture of history and the factors underlying the development and perpetuation of systems of oppression, we will have to make available dominant forms of knowledge and resources which are representative of societal power structures. None of these considerations, however, mandate an emphasis on such materials, and prompt their contextualization in a manner that reflects a sociohistorically informed framework of IF.

Such contextualization may be interpreted as violating the

ALA's statement against labeling (ALA Council, "Interpretations"), which was justly formed in the postwar era in response to the superpatriotic group Sons of the American Revolution who demanded that libraries label and restrict "subversive" literature and keep a roster of patrons who used it (Robbins 35). Yet this interpretation fails to recognize that two fundamental operations of LIS spaces – cataloging and classification – already constitute a form of institutionally sanctioned labeling that often reinforces oppressive power structures. For example, Library of Congress Classification (LCC) includes subject headings using the terms *genocide*, *holocaust*, and *massacre* when referring to Hitler's extermination of Jews during World War II and other ethnically-motivated killing campaigns carried out by non-North American nations, but none which pair the three aforementioned terms with *United States* or *Canada*. The effect of this classification is to imply that genocide can only happen outside of the context of North America, erasing the mass murder of North American indigenous peoples on which the U.S. was built and perpetuating the myth of American exceptionalism (Dudley 19). Clearly, LIS workers have long accepted the inevitability of contextualizing resources, but have typically done so in a manner that goes unnoticed since it upholds the societal status quo. A sociohistorically informed IF seeks not to abolish cataloging and classification, but to approach such processes in a way that stands in solidarity with those historically and currently marginalized.

The above outline upon which a principle of sociohistorically informed, justice-based IF can be built does not aim to be prescriptive, but rather to offer a concrete framework on which LIS workers can base their professional practices. The next and final section will recount examples of LIS workers acting toward justice against oppressive power structures in order to establish precedent for the sociohistorical IF this paper is proposing.

Conclusion: Past Social Justice Actions among LIS Workers

LIS workers throughout the profession's history have taken clear stances against the discourse of neutrality which pervades the ALA's dominant praxis of IF, acting in solidarity with those oppressed by societal power structures and recognizing their common interest in transforming society. These examples of justice-based LIS work demonstrate the ability, legitimacy, and efficacy of LIS workers to stake out explicit political positions in favor of a world free of systemic oppression.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discrimination and segregation in U.S. public spaces – including libraries – continued, with several southern library associations refusing membership to Black people (Gibson et al 755). Later that same year, Black

librarian E.J. Josey proposed a resolution to the ALA to prevent members of segregated library associations from attending national ALA conferences, thus decreasing their influence in the profession. The resolution passed successfully, and effectively ended the *de jure* segregation of libraries in the U.S. Josey went on to found the Black Caucus in 1969, though the ALA did not consider the group as an affiliate until 1992 (Gluck).

A decade after Josey's resolution passed, reference librarian Zoia Horn was jailed for her refusal to testify at the 1972 conspiracy trial of the Harrisburg Seven, a group of religious activists against the Vietnam War. An FBI informer was planted in Horn's library at Bucknell University, and implicated other library personnel in the fabricated story against the Seven. Objecting to the idea that libraries could be used for government infiltration and surveillance, Horn went to jail for 20 days for contempt of court and could have remained there for three months if the trial had not been cut short. The ALA did not come to her support at any point in the process (Sparanese 45).

Forty years later, the Ferguson Municipal Public Library (FMLP) played an active role in Black Lives Matter following the police murder of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown. The FMLP not only stayed open during the weeks-long protests, but focused its services on meeting the community's immediate needs. These services included providing space for students when fall school openings were delayed, helping local businesses to apply for government aid, and offering materials on civil rights and mental health services to facilitate emotional healing (Gibson et al 756).

These examples of LIS political activism against systemic oppression demonstrate the power that we as LIS workers have to challenge existing power structures that enact daily violence on both our patrons and ourselves. In doing so LIS workers cannot expect that we won't face backlash by those who want to see the status quo upheld, whether they're patrons, external organizations, professional associations like the ALA, or the U.S. government. Indeed, the ALA has a long history of infringing upon the sociohistorically informed IF exercised by its own members. In addition to the ALA's aforementioned failure to defend librarian Zoia Horn from unjust jailing, it similarly neglected to support librarian T. Ellis Hodgin in 1969 when he was fired and violently ostracized after joining a lawsuit against his daughter's public school for requiring pupils to engage in religious practice. The next year, the ALA did not come to the aid of University of Minnesota librarian Michael McConnell, whose contract for employment was cancelled after he attempted to marry his same-sex partner (Asato 77). When the ALA does uphold principles of IF for its members, such as with its strong and overt

actions against the US PATRIOT Act, it does so on the basis of defending “neutral” ideals of democracy and free expression without taking a stance against the oppressive power structures bound up in the issues. With its advocacy surrounding the US PATRIOT Act, for example, the ALA failed to utter one word about the Islamophobia at the heart of the anti-terrorism legislation (ALA Washington Office; ALA Council, “Resolution”; Essex).

These examples demonstrate the need for rank-and-file LIS workers to forge a path of sociohistorically informed IF, regardless of the ALA’s actions or stated principles. With a large enough group of LIS workers committed to acting for justice and solidarity, united with and playing an active participatory role in the communities around us, we have the power to transform the profession and the world.

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